Book Review

Lars Willnat and Annette J. Aw (Eds.) (2014). Social Media,
Culture and Politics in Asia. New York:
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As internet use is growing not only in the number of its users but also the purposes it is used for, media and communication scholars are therefore required to pay attention to it. One of the aspects inadequately investigated to date is the potential of the new media to enhance the political participation among its users. Moreover, the study of internet use in Asia, where the physical population and the online population ranks the world's highest, has been limited. Lars Willnat and Annette Aw therefore gathered together the scholars in Asia who have research experience and share the same interest to contribute to *"Social Media, Culture and Politics in Asia."* The project which began in 2011 was completed in 2014 and covers social media use in 9 nations.

The opening Preface to the book was written by Chrisine Ogan, Professor of Journalism and Informatics, Indiana University, who is a productive new media researcher. Her works have been cited nearly 2,000 times. Following this, Willnat and Aw outline the rational of their book in Chapter 1. Jason Martin then reviews the literature related to social media and political participation in Chapter 2. The variables that he proposes are individual social media use and social media platforms. He continues to demonstrate media effects on political participation seen in election campaigns and political protests.

The literature review in this Chapter forms a key foundation for the reader to understand the arguments which will be encountered in the following chapters.

Contributions from the 9 Asian nations selected for study are found in Chapters 3 to 11. These include social media use in 3 countries, China, Hong Kong and Taiwan, in the first 3 Chapters. Although the three countries share Chinese origin, the internet environments are almost totally different. Heavy censorship is found in China, and the people have no access to western-based social media which could be forums for the netizens to criticize their Chinese government and interact with people from other cultures or political systems. As members of a 'partially democratic' community, Hong Kong's older generation who experience a decline in political freedom use social media to mobilize protests to resist China's political influence. Finally, in Taiwan, where the younger generations generally accept the authority's decision on how the country should be run, the internet seems to serve the government as a means to disseminate information rather than a space where the public could interact with their government in a symmetrical manner.

Chapters 6 and 7 show the social media use of 2 high-tech Far Eastern countries, South Korea and Japan. In South Korea, although internet access is not a barrier to participate in political issues, laws and regulations make many Koreans reluctant to voice their opinions online. During elections, voters and politicians are not allowed to use social media for political purposes. Likewise, in Japanese culture, where harmony is highly valued, Japanese internet users avoid discussing political issues on social media. The findings shown in these chapters were the evidence that high internet penetration and a well-educated population do not necessarily lead to higher online political participation, especially while strict laws and regulations enforced.

Social media use in 3 South East Asian countries, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand, where I was the contributor, are found in Chapter 8-10. Malaysia was found to be the country where social media is the means for the public to participate most actively in

politics. Yet, recent laws and regulations were enacted resulting in a decrease in social media use for political purposes. Again, with its strict censorship laws and government-controlled print and broadcast media, Singaporean activists and opposition parties have been using social media for promoting their causes and crying out against injustice in elections. Nevertheless, the results of these activities are limited only in online media and do not translate into any change in the physical world. Additionally, the cost of internet access has prevented less educated, low income, and rural Thais to go online. In a social class conflict, young middle-class internet users tend not to use social media for political participation. However, recent political turmoil and natural disasters seem to show that this group is increasingly using social media as a space to interact with non-entertainment content.

Chapter 11 focuses on India, the largest and probably the most diverse democratic country in the world. Cell phones that could allow economically poor Indians to use social media sites and probably participate in political discussion are rapidly increasing in number although at the time *Social Media, Culture and Politics in Asia* was written (2012), just 10% of the Indian population owned one.

In Chapter 12, Willnat makes a comparative analysis of the data from all 9 nations, finding that the use of political blogs and Facebook groups results in a higher level of online political participation and is dependent upon political, social and culture systems. Finally, editors Willnat and Aw make their conclusion in Chapter 13. Also the survey questionnaire used for collecting the research data is provided in the Appendix.

From my perspective as one of the book's contributors, even though its title reads, the social media in 'Asia', those who might want to gain knowledge of social media use in Middle Eastern countries like Saudi Arabia, and Egypt, where Islamic culture and unique political systems hold a powerful sway, might be relatively disappointed to discover these countries were not included. Still, there are several benefits for readers to gain from

reading this book. Each chapter contains discussion not only of online political participation, but a comprehensive, insightful and credible statistical overview of social media use also. Scholars who are interested in Asian studies will also benefit from a recent, and easy-to-read review of the political situations and the influences of culture in the 9 Asian countries surveyed. New media scholars can learn from this publication how the new media is used by the youth, as they are included in the survey samples, both for work-related and leisure-related activities. Moreover, unlike qualitative methods where subjectivity might hinder replicability, the nature of the quantitative methods using survey questionnaires could be repeated, of course, with permission, in other countries or employed again for a longitudinal study in the participating nations to measure the changes in social media use over a particular period of time. To the extent a body of knowledge in comparative media use in particular nations is considered to be relatively lacking, especially in this Asian region of the world, *Social Media, Culture and Politics in Asia* can served as an exemplar for transnational media and communication researchers, for its construction of the framework, standardized methodology, and validated, reliable questionnaire.